



CONGRESSMAN HENRY A. WAXMAN NEWS

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WAXMAN QUERIES CHEMICAL COMPANIES NATIONWIDE ABOUT POISON GAS LEAKS

Congressman Henry Waxman (D.-CA.) today released letters he has sent to the chief executive officers of the nation's largest chemical companies as the first step in a major effort to "get the facts we need to fully evaluate the public health threat from the more than 5000 chemical plants in this country."

The nation's leading chemical companies are being asked to supply, for each of their plants, information on 1) the potential for a large scale poison gas leak, 2) the identity and amount of poison gases regularly leaking into the community's air, and 3) the adverse health effects of these substances. Waxman, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Health and Environment, is asking for a response within two weeks. He said that he plans to use this data in his Subcommittee's effort to draft and pass legislation early this year to assure that these plants are safe.

"I was very distressed to learn that no government agency has even attempted to collect this information," he said. "The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has responsibility for protecting our nation's air supply, has no idea what's coming from these plants." "When we sought confirmation from the Agency for our list of chemical plants, we discovered that EPA does not even have an up-to-date list of where the chemical plants in this country are."

Waxman noted that at the Subcommittee's hearing on poison gases from chemical plants in Institute, West Virginia last December "we received information from the State Pollution Control Board indicating that thousands of tons of poison gases, including MIC, are leaked into that community's air every year." Waxman noted that "cancer rates in that area are 25% to 50% above the national norm." "It is my fear that the situation in Institute is little different than in the thousands of American communities located near chemical plants," he said.

He added that "the responses to our survey should for the first time give us a concrete indication of how serious this nationwide problem is." "I am very concerned about the dangers of the all too routine, low level leaks, as well as the potential for another disastrous large scale leak."

Waxman blamed much of the current problem on EPA's unwillingness to regulate poison gas leaks from chemical plants: "Some 14 years ago in the 1970 Clean Air Act Congress directed EPA to require the chemical industry to use the best technology available to control leaks of dangerous gases. But the Agency has regulated only five substances, ignoring the dozens of poisons that are routinely leaked into the air. After years of study they have been unable to decide if even such obviously dangerous gases as methyl isocyanate, the gas which killed more than 2000 in Bhopal, and phosgene, used as a weapon in World War I, should be considered 'hazardous.'"

He explained that "since EPA has been unable to decide which chemicals are hazardous, we've had to rely on industry to supply a list of dangerous air pollutants which we can use as a starting point." "The inquiries we are mailing today focus on 19 substances considered 'extremely hazardous' in Union Carbide's chemical evaluation system." This is the classification which the company attaches to MIC.

Waxman also released a list of the companies and the plants from which information is requested.